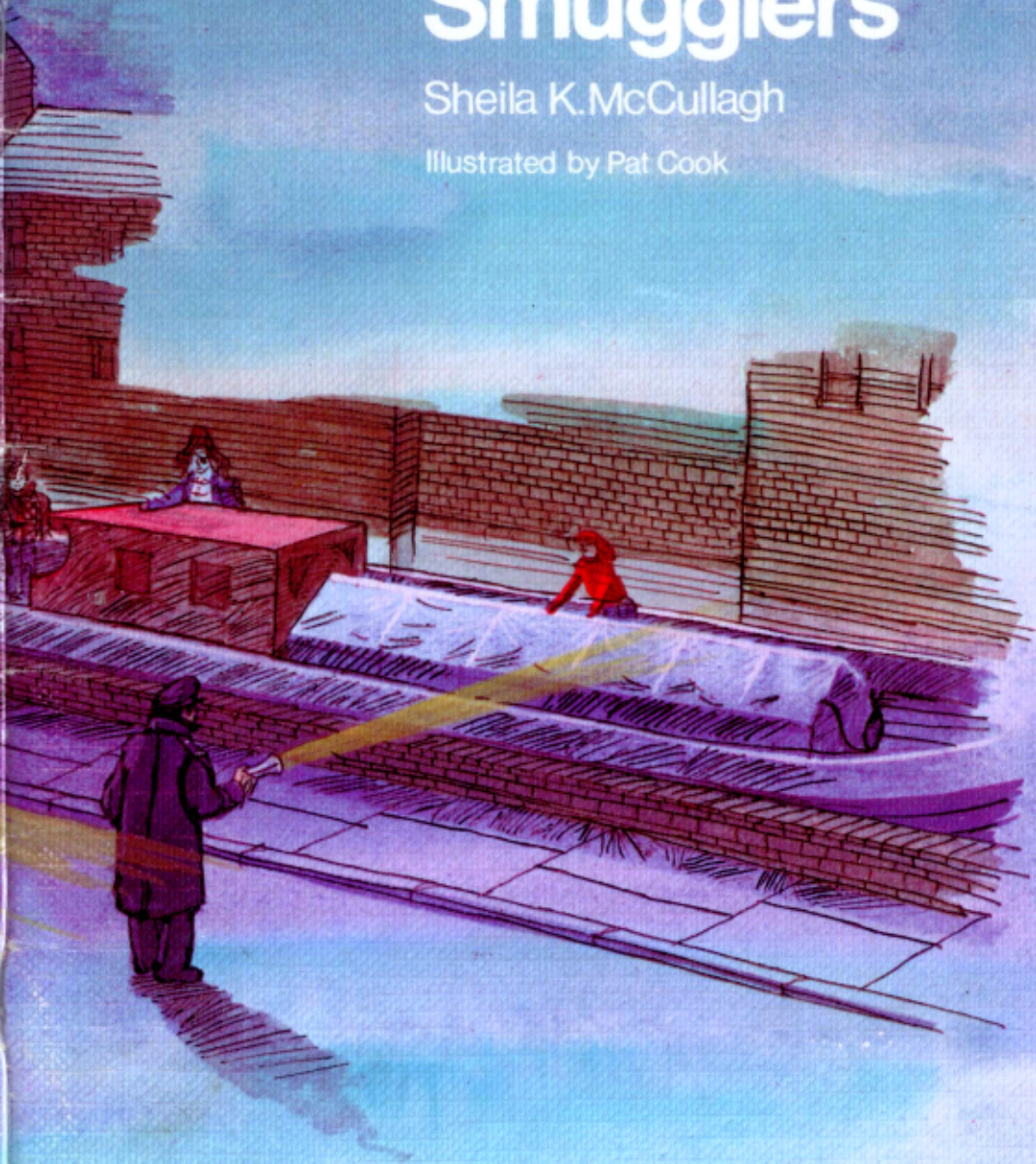


Tim and the Hidden People

Tim and the Smugglers

Sheila K. McCullagh

Illustrated by Pat Cook



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Nelson



It was Saturday afternoon, and Tim had nothing to do. He kicked a ball about in The Yard for a time. No other children lived in The Yard, so no one came out to join him; and it wasn't much fun.

So Tim hid the ball at the foot of the old tree, and went out of The Yard into the street. He wandered along beside the canal, until he came to the bridge.



As he turned towards the bridge, Tim stopped.
A strange man was leaning over the rail,
and looking down into the water.

He was a very strange man indeed. He had a
red stocking cap on his head, and big gold rings
in his ears.

He wore a red jersey, and blue trousers
which were held up by a rope tied round his
waist.



As Tim stood there, the man looked up. He had bright blue eyes, and he looked at Tim from under thick, black eyebrows.

There was a white scar on his cheek, and for a moment Tim felt afraid of him.

Then he smiled at Tim, and nodded, just as if he knew him.

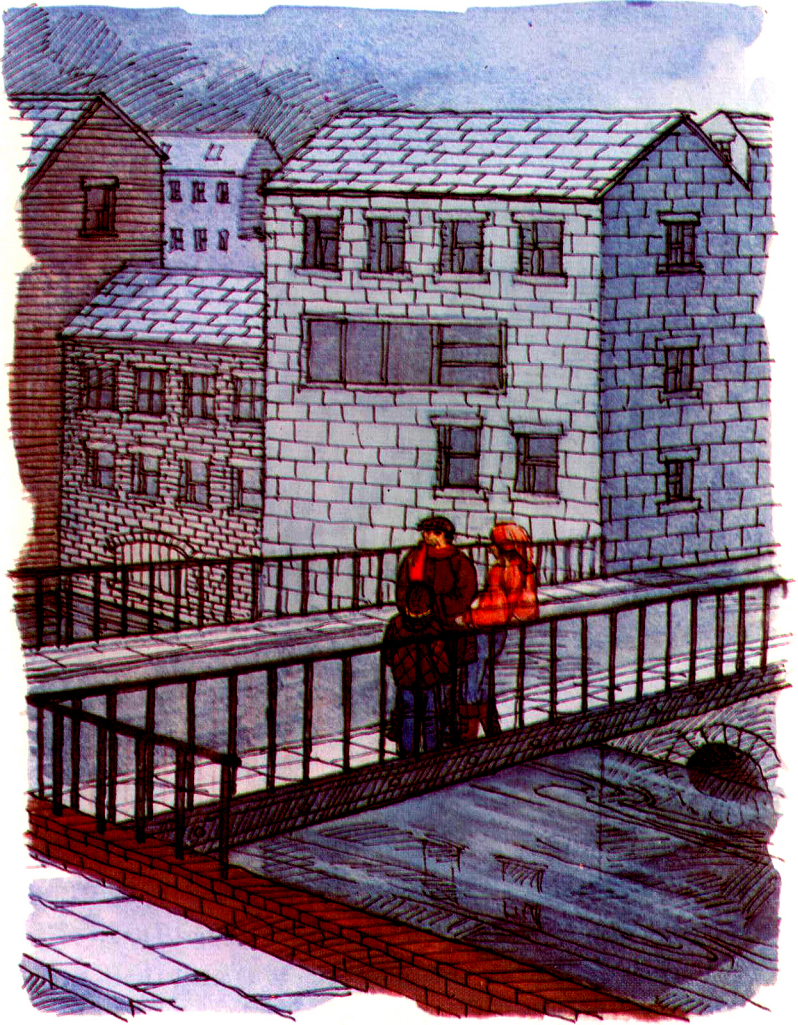


Tim went on to the bridge.

"You've been a long time," said the stranger. "I've been here waiting for you an hour or more."

"I didn't know you were waiting for me," said Tim. His hand gripped the key deep down in his pocket. He knew now that this must be one of the Hidden People.

"Tobias asked me to come," said the stranger.



A man came over the bridge. He didn't stop, or look at the stranger, and Tim knew that he couldn't see him. The stranger was invisible.

Tim wondered whether he was invisible himself. But then the man looked at him, and nodded.

"Fine day," he said. "Going fishing?"

He didn't wait for an answer, but went on over the bridge.

The stranger laughed.

"You're not invisible," he said. "Not yet. But you will be tonight, if you come with us."

"Where are you going?" asked Tim.

"We're running a cargo down the canal," said the stranger. "Captain Jory said that you'd be coming with us."

"How far are you going?" asked Tim.

The stranger laughed again. "You're careful, aren't you?" he said. "Well, you should be careful with strangers. But we're only going down as far as Hollow Hill. You can be back by morning. Meet me here at the bridge at midnight, if you want to come."

The stranger nodded, and turned away.

Two men came over the bridge. The stranger stepped to one side to let them pass.

The men were talking, and took no notice of Tim. He looked across the bridge, but the stranger had vanished.



Tim looked up and down the canal. The water was dark and muddy. There was an old boat moored to the bank farther down, but there was no one in sight.

Tim turned back into The Yard. He got his ball out from under the tree, and kicked it slowly round The Yard until it was time for the late tea that was Tim's supper as well.



The time passed slowly, but at last it was time to go to bed.

Tim didn't undress. He put out the light and lay down on the bed, listening for the Town Hall clock.

The Town Hall clock struck every quarter of an hour. It seemed a long time before it struck eleven. Tim waited.

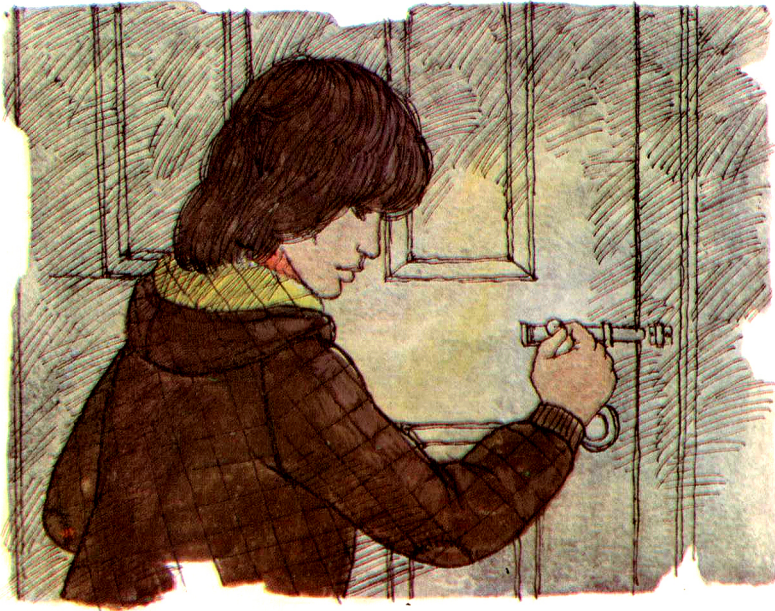
The clock struck a quarter past eleven.

Then half-past.

When it struck the three quarters, Tim got up. He went over to the door, opened it carefully and listened.

The house below was dark and still.

Tim went softly downstairs.



As he came to the next floor, he heard Mr. Bunce snoring. (Mr. Bunce was the lodger who lived in the first floor rooms.) Tim tip-toed on.

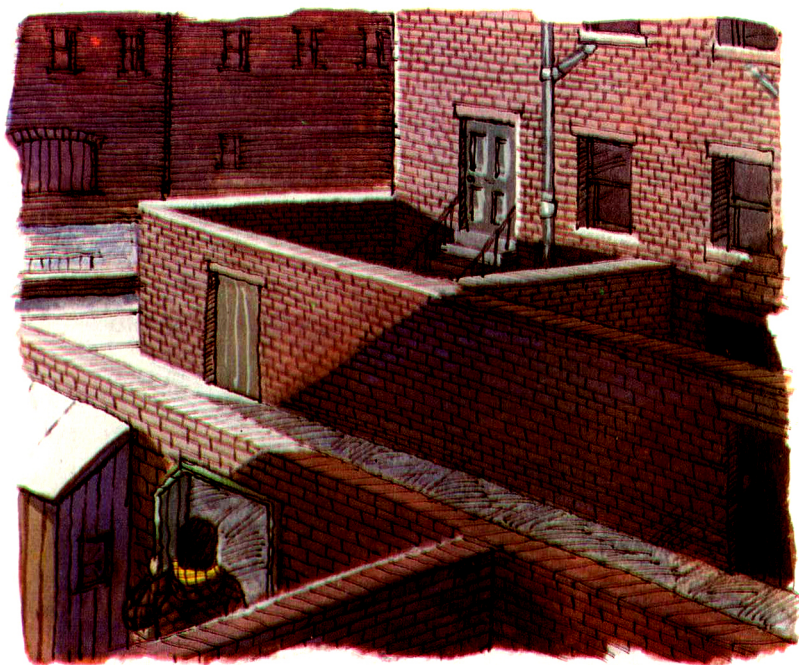
The ground floor was in darkness. Tim crept down the passage to the door at the back.

It was bolted. Tim felt for the bolt, and slid it back.

It made a little clink.

He listened.

There was no sound from the lodgers above or from Aunt May in the basement. Tim opened the back door and slipped out, shutting the door carefully behind him.



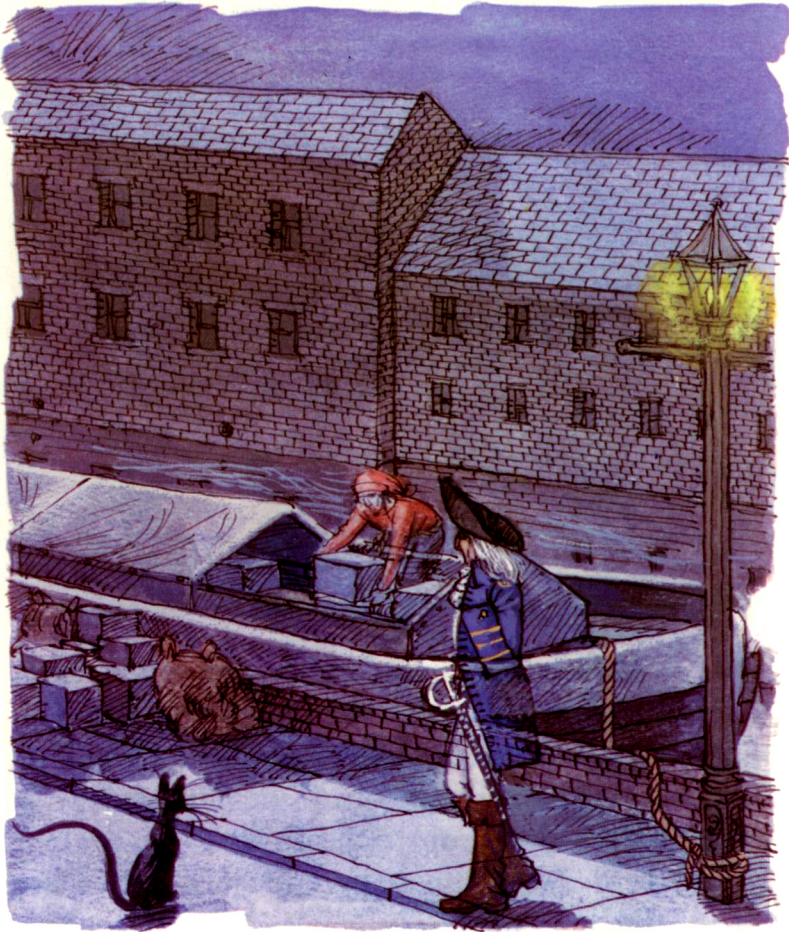
The back yard was in bright moonlight. Tim looked down at the basement window. That was the room where Aunt May slept. The window was open, but the curtains were drawn, and the room was dark.

He crept down the steps and across the yard to the back gate.

He slipped out of the gate, down the back lane, round the corner and along the canal.

As he turned into the street, the Town Hall clock struck twelve.

He began to run.



It was bright moonlight, and Captain Jory was standing on the canal bank. As Tim came up, he saw that the old boat had been pulled in to the bank. A rope was tied to a street lamp, and a pile of sacks and boxes stood on the street.



The stranger Tim had seen that morning was standing in the boat.

Captain Jory was helping him to load the cargo, and Tobias was sitting on the bank, watching.



“Here you are!” said Tobias, as Tim came along. “You’re just in time. The boat’s almost loaded.”

“Where are you going? And what’s in the sacks?” asked Tim.

Captain Jory tossed the last sack to the man in the boat. “We’re going to Hollow Hill, where the Hidden People live,” he said. “And we’re taking what we need: food and drink mostly. Jump in. We don’t want to hang around now.”

“Can – can anyone see us?” asked Tim, as he climbed down into the boat.

“They can’t see us, but they can see the boat,” said the stranger. “They can see the cargo, too – we lifted it from the big shop down Canal Street a few minutes ago.”

“But that’s stealing!” said Tim.

Captain Jory laughed. “It is and it isn’t,” he said. “We have our own ways of paying for things. That shop belongs to Mr. Brown. His wife was out playing Bingo tonight, and Tobias was there, making sure the right numbers came up for her. Tobias is good at magic. She won the big prize. That will more than pay for everything we’ve got. You can call it stealing if you like, but I don’t.”

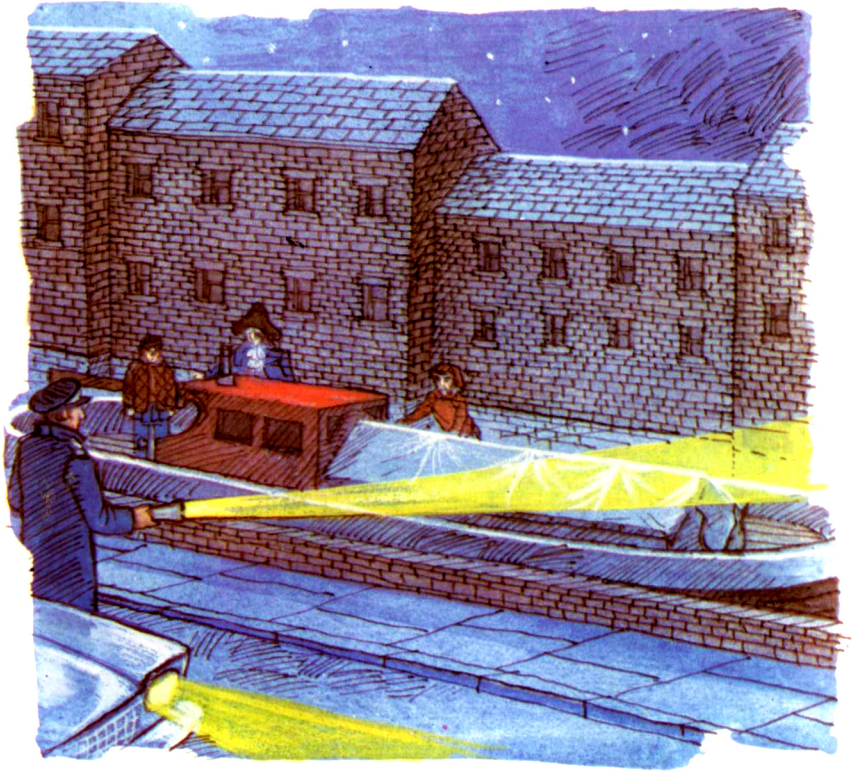
“No – no,” said Tim. “Perhaps it isn’t.” But he wasn’t sure.

“All right Tobias? Let her go, Jack,” said Captain Jory.

The stranger dropped a rope into the canal.

The boat began to move.

There was no sound of an engine and Tim decided it must be the magic of the Hidden People making it move.



They hadn't gone very far, when they saw the lights of a car coming down Canal Street.

"Put her in by the side, Jack," said Captain Jory. "Make it look as if the boat is tied up."

The car stopped. Two men got out, and came along the bank. They were policemen. The Hidden People stood still, watching them. Tim remembered that they were invisible. He hoped that he was invisible too.



A policeman shone a flashlight into the boat.
Tim held his breath and waited.

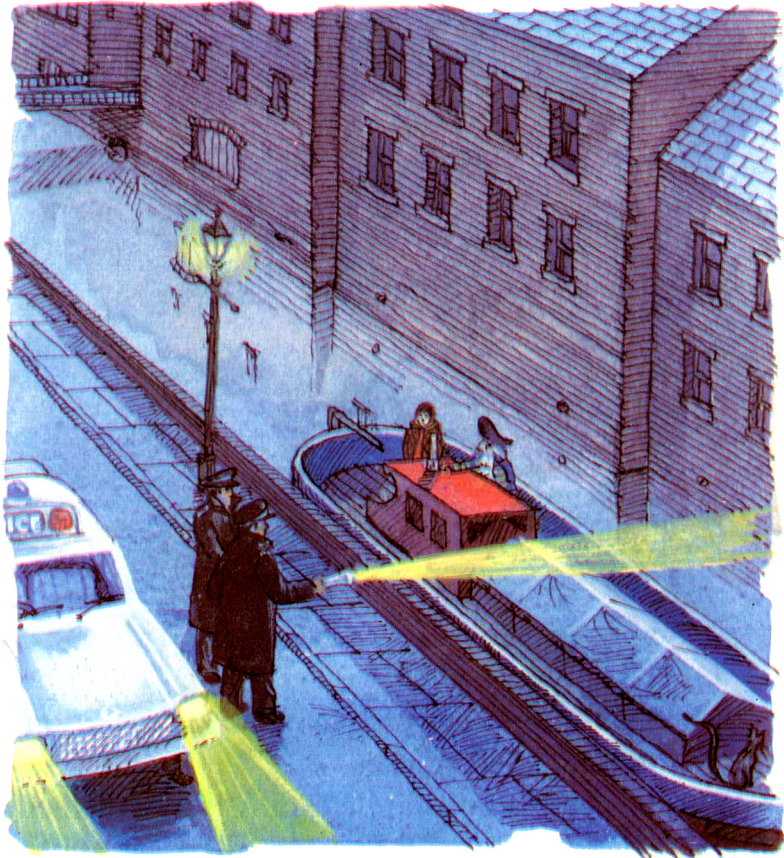
The light shone on the boat, and moved along
to the man called Jack.

But as the light touched him, he vanished.
Where he had been standing, there was now
nothing in the boat.

Captain Jory was still in the shadows, but as
the light touched him, he vanished too.

The light shone on Tim – and passed on.
And Tim knew that he must be invisible.

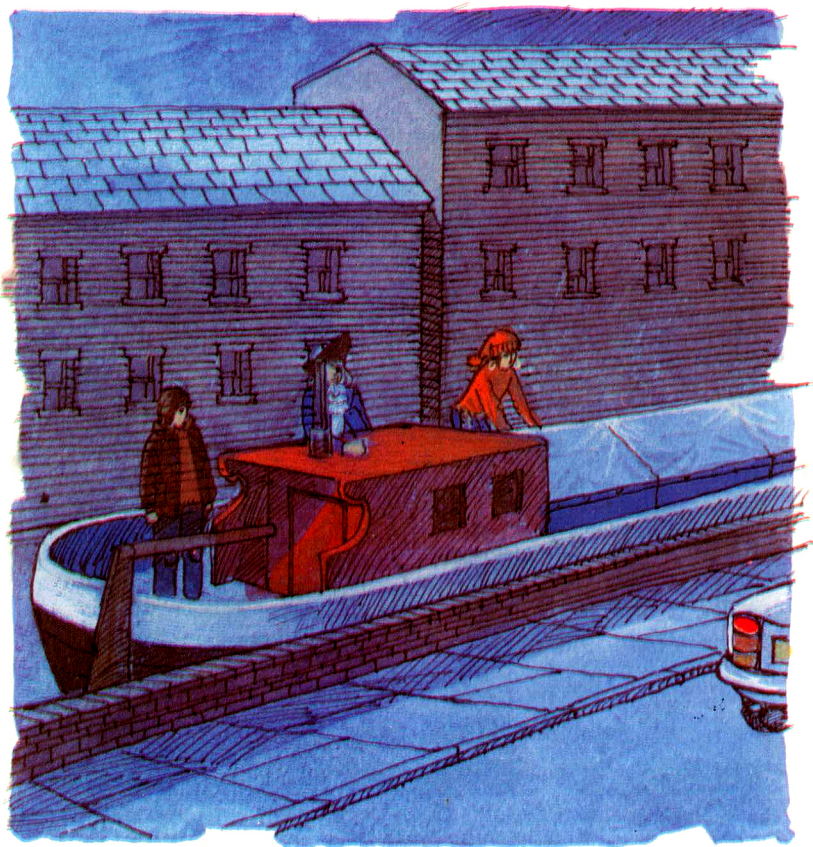
He let his breath go. He couldn't see Tobias.
The boat seemed empty.



“They don’t often tie up down here,” said one of the policemen. “Do you think it’s all right?”

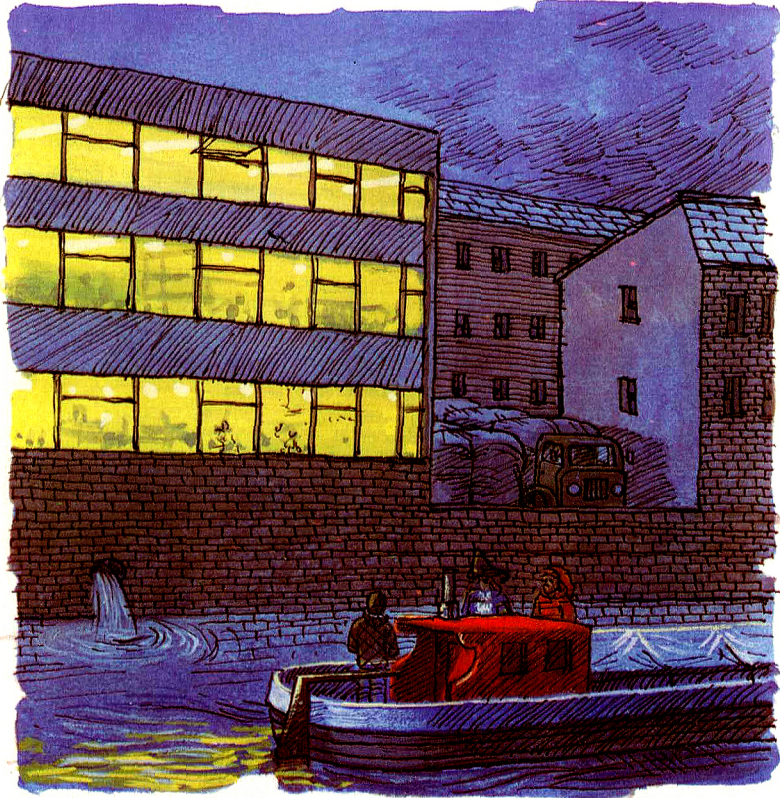
“I’ve seen the boat here before,” said the other. “We’ll ask them about it in the morning. There’s no one here. It looks all right.”

They went back to the car.



As his eyes got used to the darkness again, Tim could see that Jack and Captain Jory were standing in the boat just where they had stood before.

Tobias was still looking out from the bows.
The car started up and left.
The boat began to move.



The town was very silent, as they slipped along in the shadows.

They passed one factory where there were lights in the windows, and water pouring out of a pipe into the canal, but most of the buildings were dark.

They passed the fair-ground, but it was empty.

They came to the end of the houses at last.



The moon shone down on trees and grass. Sometimes there was a farm house, with dark windows. Everyone was asleep.

“We shall be at the lock gates soon now,” said Jack.

“How do you work the gates?” asked Tim.

Captain Jory laughed softly. “By magic,” he said. “The same way that we work the boat.”

“Look out – there’s someone there,” Tobias called from the bows.

The boat stopped.

A man and a woman were sitting on the path by the lock gate ahead.



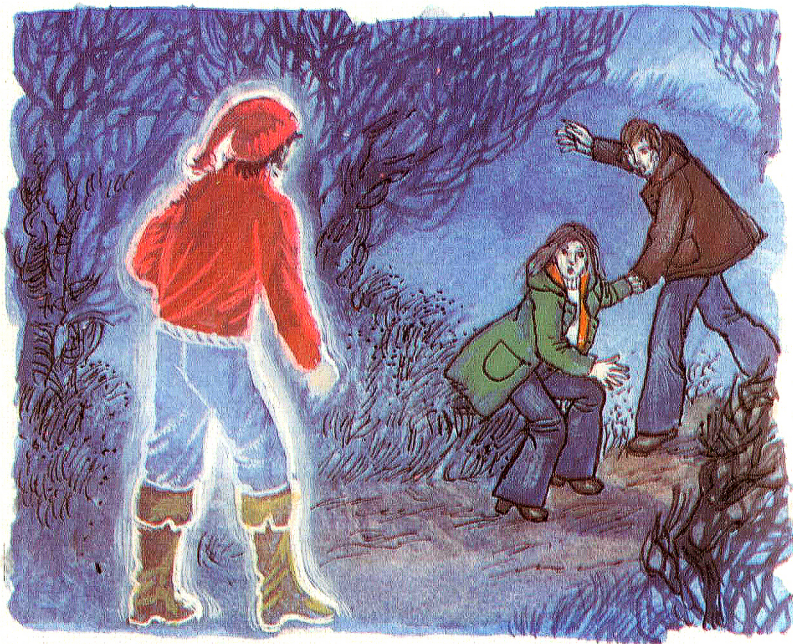
“We shall have to do something about that,” said Captain Jory. “We can’t let them see the gates open and close, and the boat go in, and the lock fill up all by itself.”

“Will you scare them off, or shall I?” asked Jack softly.

“You do it,” said Captain Jory. “I did it last time.”

He took the boat in under a tree.

Jack jumped off the boat on to the path by the canal. The others stayed in the boat. They were hidden in the shadow of the tree.



Tim watched.

Jack went slowly along the path towards the lock gates.

He suddenly seemed much brighter. He seemed to shine, just as the magic key shone when Tim first saw it.

There was a scream from the lock gates.

They heard a woman cry: "Bill, Bill! Look there! Whatever is it?"

There was a yell, and the sound of running feet, as the two people tore off up the path as if they had seen a ghost.



Jack came back, laughing to himself, and jumped into the boat.

“They won’t sit by *that* gate at midnight again,” he said.

The boat moved out from the bank, towards the lock.

The gates opened for them by themselves, and closed behind them.

The water rushed out.

The gates on the far side opened, and they sailed on, along the canal.



The sky seemed a little lighter in the east, when at last Tobias called out, “There’s the hill!”

Tim could see a hill rising up from the other side of a field.

There was a big stone at the foot of the hill, and as the boat stopped, the stone rolled to one side. A light shone out from inside the hill, and Tim saw strange people coming out of the hill in the moonlight.

The boat bumped into the right-hand bank of the canal.



“This is where you go home, Tim,” said Captain Jory.

“But – but how do I get home?” asked Tim.

“Tobias will take you,” said the captain.

Tim looked along the boat. Tobias had gone.

“Where is he?” he asked.

“He’s gone to the hill, to meet the Hidden People,” said Jack. “He won’t come back now. He’s forgotten all about you.”

“You can’t trust Tobias,” said Captain Jory. “You’ll have to get home by yourself.”

“But I don’t know the way,” said Tim.

“Follow the canal,” said Jack.

The Hidden People from the hill were nearly at the boat.



Captain Jory took a step towards him. He seemed to grow bigger and Tim suddenly felt afraid. Captain Jory lifted his one arm. “Go!” he cried. “Go now!”

Tim blinked his eyes.

He was alone in the boat. The hill was shut, and there was no one there. There was just an empty boat on a dark canal.

A cold wind blew across the field.

Tim clambered out of the boat on to the path along the canal bank. He shivered.

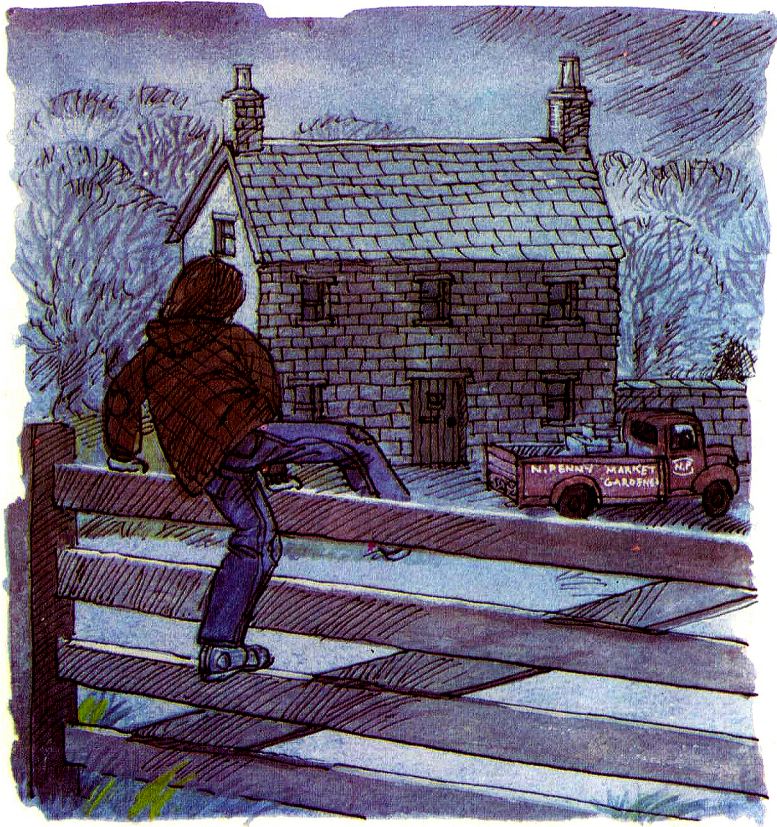
The empty boat moved slowly back across the canal to the far bank. It stopped.



The sky was beginning to get light.

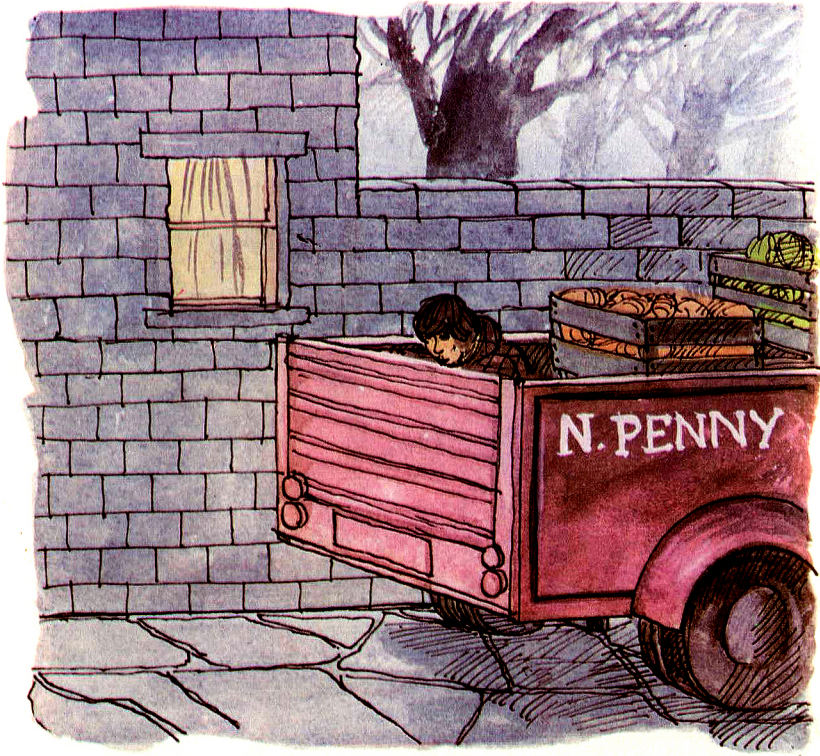
Tim heard the sound of a car. He looked across the grass and saw the lights of the car running along a road.

“I might get a lift home,” he said to himself, and set off towards it.



As Tim climbed over a gate on to the side of the road, he saw a house.

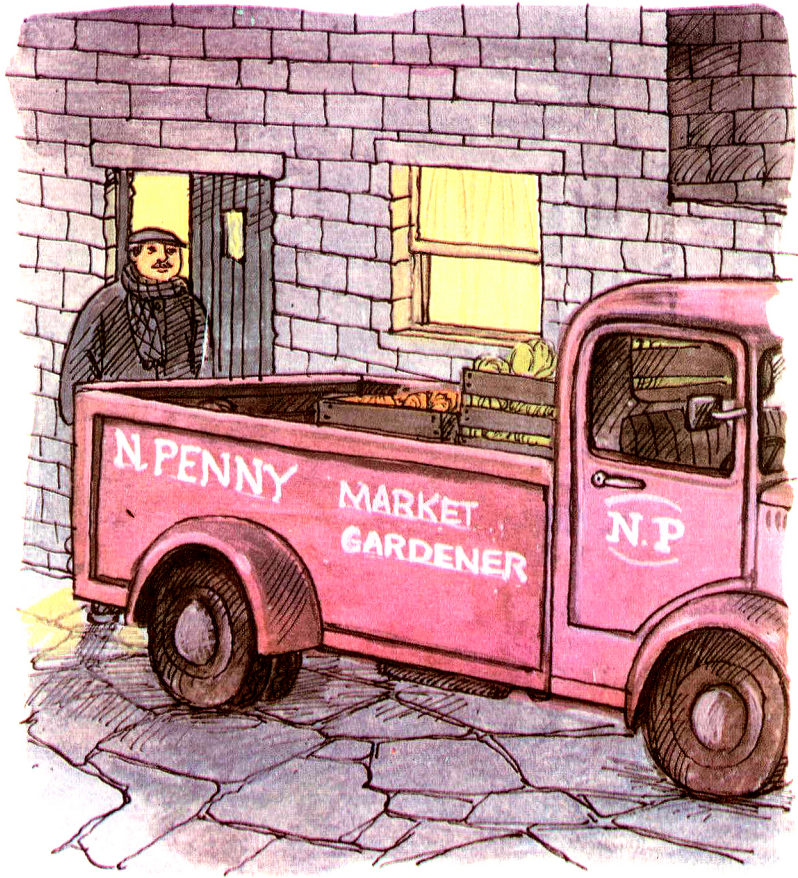
There was an open lorry parked beside it. Tim went over to the lorry and looked at it. "N. Penny, Market Gardener", was painted on the side.



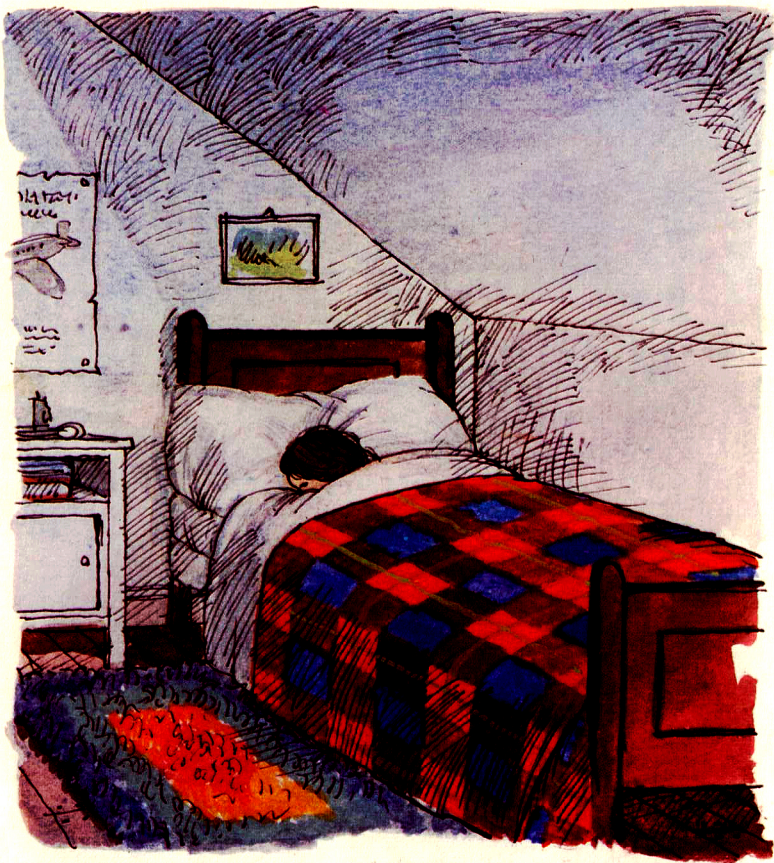
“Oh, good,” said Tim. Mr. Penny kept a shop not far from The Yard. His son had a market garden outside the town, and Mr. Penny often sold things his son had grown.

As he stood there looking, a light came on in the house.

Tim climbed up among the crates of cabbages and sacks of potatoes in the back of the lorry and hid. He didn't want Mr. Penny to see him.



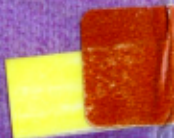
He didn't have to wait very long, before he heard the door of the house open, and Mr. Penny calling a cheerful "Good-bye" to his son. Mr. Penny got into the cab of the lorry. The door slammed, and they were off.



Tim jumped off the back of the lorry when it stopped at the traffic lights near The Yard. Mr. Penny didn't see him.

No one was up in the tall house in The Yard, as Tim slipped in at the back door.

He remembered to bolt the door again, before he crept upstairs to bed.



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